



Roll

Out the Barrel, We'll
Have a Barrel of ...

by Lt. Mark Lucas

Yikes!

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It was a beautiful day in southern Turkey. The flight schedule offered a training flight in which we were to do basic formation work, section approaches over the water, cruise maneuvering and a little tac form. After about a month with little flying at Whidbey Island, we deployed to Incirlik. We were just getting back in the saddle with our first flight in the local area. We were Dash 2 of a section of Prowlers, and, with the exception of one crew member, three of us had flown extensively as a crew in support of Operation Allied Force two months prior. The brief was according to NATOPS, but it didn't cover ACM training rules. This omission would haunt us.

We did our crew brief, emphasizing operational risk management (ORM) because we hadn't yet flown in the area, and one of our crew members (ECMO 1) was new. We knew we had to walk before we ran; we needed to familiarize ourselves with local area procedures and gradually get aggressive.

The flight to the practice area was uneventful, and we knocked out the practice approaches at altitude (the hard deck was at 5,000 feet). We began our cruise maneuvering, then things started to go awry.

We were just getting comfortable with the G's through a few warm-up maneuvers. Our pilot was very smooth on the controls, and we were having fun flying around in the clear weather (a pleasure after months of clag at Whidbey). The lead pilot began a barrel roll at approximately 10,000 feet and lost sight of us off his right side. Distracted by trying to regain sight of us, he delayed his pull once "over the top" and floated, inverted, to 13,000 feet and 270 KIAS. The delay at the top of the maneuver resulted in a delayed application of roll. He finally ended up nose low and losing altitude fast. Being a good wingman, our pilot followed. When I looked at our attitude passing 5,000 feet, we were 60 degrees nose low, 45 degrees angle of bank, and 500 KIAS. "Watch your nose," I piped up on the ICS.


Aggressively pulling for the recovery, we bottomed out at approximately 1,800 feet (that's 3,200 feet below the deck, for the English majors), with our radalt blaring. After wiping the sweat off our brows, we sheepishly completed the rest of our maneuvers.

Our extensive debrief produced several lessons. First, conduct the right briefs before walking to the jet. Even though we weren't doing any type of ACM, we should have briefed the training rules, which emphasize knock-it-off calls, hard and soft decks, and weather criteria for maneuvering flights.

Second, if the situation starts to degenerate, anyone in the flight can call, "Knock it off" on the ICS or UHF. My warning about attitude was the only comm during this fiasco. Nobody said anything over the UHF. Although everyone was well aware of the danger (as evidenced by the comments during the debrief), no one was aggressive enough to speak up.

Third, use ORM. How frequent and how hard were your recent sorties? To a fighter guy, basic section work is second nature. In Prowlers, with some squadrons having only one flyable jet for long periods, formation basics can become fuzzy. Is your cockpit ready for a challenging, section-maneuvering mission? On this day, it would have been wiser to crawl (and work as a single through basic aerobic maneuvers) before walking or running.

Make sure you brief dive recovery, 10-degree and 50-percent rules, and the ACM training rules before low-level maneuvers (even though the soft deck is supposed to keep you away from the low-level environment).

Finally, exceeding your personal comfort level (and that of the crew) should be enough to warrant a knock-it-off call. Don't let safety take a backseat, even if you're in the backseat. 

Lt. Lucas flies with VAQ-134